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Airport logjam looming?

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It's supposed to get better, but airport delays would most likely get worse come the new year unless San Jose's airport gets additional time to meet federal regulations on airport security.

The nation's 429 airports face a Dec. 31 federal deadline to ensure that every bag boarding an aircraft is electronically scanned for explosives. If the deadline isn't met, bags would have to be searched manually or with bomb-sniffing dogs and would most likely cause significant flight delays.

"Yeah, the [San Jose] airport will need more time, definitely," says, U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, who along with San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales chaired a San Jose airport security task force. "[Airport officials] will have a difficult time meeting the deadline."

Mineta San Jose Airport officials have been criticized by federal officials in recent days for failing to develop a plan to meet the Dec. 31 deadline.

"We want San Jose to look a little harder to make that system work there," says John Flaherty, chief of staff to U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, the airport's namesake. "They have a lot of hard work ahead of them."

But airport officials point out that the federal Transportation Security Administration is ultimately responsible for the San Jose airport's security plan. The airport still does not have a permanent TSA-appointed federal security director, notes airport spokesman Jim Peterson.

"There is no doubt that San Jose has short-term and long-term challenges," Mr. Peterson says. "San Jose is not alone in this respect."

Indeed, a U.S. Senate bill written by Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., would exempt up to 40 airports — and perhaps more — from the Dec. 31 guideline. The bill cleared the Senate's Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee Sept. 19. Some estimates put the number of airports that will have trouble meeting the federal regulations as high as 75. Mr. Mineta, while not taking a formal position on the bill, acknowledges that some airports will need additional time, Transportation spokesman Chet Luner says.

But eligible airports would have to spell out how they would use that additional time to meet federal requirements in order to gain the extension, Mr. Flaherty says.

Mr. Peterson says San Jose airport is not counting on an extension in order to meet the new federal regulations. He pledged that San Jose airport will meet the Dec. 31 deadline one way or another.

"We have a variety of options available to us and we will work out a plan," he says. "While the regulations haven't changed, the ways available to meet those [regulations] are changing all the time."

That's not to say an extension wouldn't be welcomed, says David Vossbrink, press secretary for Mr. Gonzales.

"At first blush it makes all the sense in the world," Mr. Vossbrink says. "We would want a little more time to make sure [the new security measures] function properly in order to get people onto their flights in a timely manner."

Among the problems San Jose airport officials face is where to place its large baggage-scanning devices and how to keep lines from spiraling out of control while passengers and luggage are checked for weapons, explosives and other contraband.

San Jose airport officials would like to install baggage-scanning machines on luggage conveyor belts to speed up the procedure and reduce the number of people needed to operate the machines.

San Jose airport's lobbies don't have the space for the 13-17 van-sized baggage scanners needed to adequately scan everybody's luggage. San Jose airport currently has two baggage-scanning devices that check approximately 1 percent to 2 percent of the bags loaded onto flights.

Some security checkpoints have already been redesigned to speed up the flow through metal detectors, but others still cause problems, says TSA agent Mark Pooler.

"More space is needed and I'm not sure how we'll do that," Mr. Pooler says. "We are in the process of defining how we will change things."

Mr. Peterson says a plan is being developed by TSA and airport staff for federal approval. He would not say if the airport will seek more time to make the plan work.

"It's a matter of what effect it will have on customer service," Mr. Peterson says. "We can get it done, but what will it look like and how will it effect customer service?"

The airport's efforts are further hampered by the fact that installing large numbers of baggage scanners in Terminal C could trigger state seismic safety laws. Under state law, buildings being remodeled must meet up-to-date earthquake safety regulations. Terminal C was constructed in 1965. It is scheduled to be torn down when the airport goes to a single terminal system, originally slated to be finished by 2009.

Airport officials have discussed plans to build a separate building to handle the baggage-scanning machines. Bags would be put on conveyor belts that run through the scanning devices before being loaded onto aircraft. That building could become the core to the new terminal, Mr. Peterson says. Metropolitan Oakland International Airport is constructing a similar building at its airport.

Mr. Honda is seeking to make the San Jose airport eligible for a federal pilot program that would allow airport officials to try experimental ways to uphold security. Under the pilot program, airport officials would be able to seek out innovative ways to meet federal security guidelines.

"That's why we put together the blue-ribbon task force, to find ways to make this work," Mr. Honda says.

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